

*INFINITE "BECLOSENESS" IN
JULIAN OF NORWICH'S
A REVELATION OF LOVE*

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In *The Archaeology of Religious Women*, Roberta Gilchrist asserts, "studies of gender and space must ask how space reinforces or transforms one's knowledge of how to proceed as a man or a woman in one's society."¹ Gilchrist concludes that women not only acted as complicit agents of social segregation, expressed through spaces such as religious enclosure, but that they were also capable of manipulating the metaphorical significance of the space they occupied in order to affirm their own social and political agendas.² In contrast, Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg has argued, "space is neither inert nor neutral, nor is its organization, articulation, or the formulation of its boundaries a natural phenomenon." Spatial constructs, rather, are historical and cultural productions.³ The former argument suggests that individuals have a hand in constructing and manipulating the spaces they occupy, while the latter seems to suggest that larger discourses operate upon individuals to construct space for them. I would like to propose a middle ground, where we can acknowledge that individuals are not only acted upon but that they also act upon the dynamic spaces they inhabit, and often within the discourses of existing constructions and boundaries. According to this theory, using the interpretive tools available to her, an individual both situates *herself*, and is situated by the confluence of ideas in operation around her. Building upon this notion, it seems reasonable to assert that an individual can situate herself not only within the physical limits of corporally inhabited space but also within the imagined limits of the narrative space of text in such a way that physical emplacement and imaginative emplacement are mutually inclusive, each being both defined and refined by the other. Thus narrative space situates physical space into text so that the physical boundaries of space operate as interpretive tools within the setting of the narrative imagination.

In *A Revelation of Love* by the anchoress Julian of Norwich (ca. 1393 to ca. 1416), the restrictive space of the anchoritic enclosure comes into tension with the imaginative space of the text.⁴ The rhetoric of religious enclosure becomes an anchor for Julian's theological imagination. She imagines that enclosed, sealed, or (according to Julian's lexicon) beclosed space represented by the anchoritic cell, the closed shell of a hazelnut or the human body, contains the never-ending space of the city of the soul and the uncreated. Sealed space encloses unlimited space. The physical limits of the beclosen are rendered infinite in the imagination.⁵ Developed to its fullest logical conclusion through the practice of anchoritism, Julian renegotiates the sealed, confined space of the religious enclosure in narrative place to imagine a vast landscape of sacred space that is enclosed within the fastened boundaries of the female body and anchoritic cell.

Religious seclusion served as a tangible and secured sign of a woman's withdrawal from the world and confirmed her physical and spiritual containment. While seclusion operated as a predominant option for women throughout much of medieval Christianity, in 1298 Boniface VIII established it as official ecclesiastical policy with *Periculoso*. This decretal enshrined religious enclosure into canon law as the only officially recognized mode of professed feminine religious vocation and expression.⁶

Enclosure became one of the identifying characteristics of female religiosity and religious vocation. It effectively and efficiently closed off a woman, either as a member of an enclosed community or as an individual, from the moral and physical dangers of the world, while also sparing the world from them. A late eleventh-century Norman *vita* of Saint Augustine provides a particularly visceral example of medieval Franco-English claustration discourse, illustrating just how seriously its proponents treated enclosure:

A prestigious matron attempted to enter [the church of Saint Augustine at Sai] with a large wax candle, as if the saint would be flattered by her power and wealth. To those who stood by and attempted to frighten her off she responded that she had not sinned against the saint but desired to do him honour, and she pressed on her

presumptuous intention. And she had scarcely reached the forbidden boundary and sacred threshold when her entrails suddenly burst out; the secret parts of her womb flowed upon the earth, and she fell down miserably and died. The dead woman was dragged outside and taught everyone in horrific fashion what she herself had believed of no one. By such a rebuke all women have been instructed that they should fear touching *open* doors more than *closed* ones.⁷ (my emphasis)

In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which dates to the 1430s, a monk at Canterbury Cathedral reproved Margery, saying that “I wold þow wer cloyd in an hows of ston þat þer schuld no man speke wyth þe “[I would thou were closed in a house of stone that there should no man speak with thee]—presumably referring to domestic or religious seclusion as superior options to wandering the countryside, murmuring the Gospel.⁸

Two valuable examples of anchoritic literature written in Middle English for women and known to have been extant in Julian’s lifetime are *De Institutione Inclusarum* (*On the Instruction of Enclosed Women*) by Aelred of Rievaulx and the anonymous *Ancrene Wisse*. *Ancrene Wisse* (*The Anchoress’ Guide*), which probably formed some of the source material for *A Revelation of Love*, expressed the anchorhold in womblike terms that established Christ’s in-utero status as explicitly anchoritic:⁹

Ant nes he him soelf reclus i Maries wombe? þeos twa þing limpeð to ancre, nearowðe and bitternesse; for wombe is nearow wununge, þer ure Lauerd wes reclus, and tis word “Marie,” as Ich ofte habbe iseid, spealeð “bitterness.” Ȝef Ȝe þenne i nearow stude þolieð bitternesse, Ȝe beoð his feolahes, reclus as he wes i Marie wombe [. . .] Marie wombe and þis þruh weren his ancre-huses.

[And was he himself not a recluse in Mary’s womb? These two things belong to the anchorite, narrowness and bitterness; for the womb is a narrow dwelling, there your Lord was a recluse, and this word “Marie,” as I often have said, spells “bitterness.” If you then in the narrow stay, enduring bitterness, you are his followers, a recluse as he was in Mary’s womb [. . .] Mary’s womb and this coffin were his anchor-houses.]¹⁰

De Institutione Inclusarum was a major source for the *Ancrene Wisse*.¹¹ Written between 1162 and 1164 for his anchoritic

sister, Aelred of Rievaulx specifically placed the scene of the Annunciation in the enclosed space of Mary's bedchamber, which could be compared to Mary's sealed womb:¹²

And ferst goo into þy pryve chaumbre wit our lady Marie
wher schee abood þe angel message [. . .] þanne, sustre,
wundre gretly in þyn herte how þilke lord [. . .] was iclosed
witynne þe bowelys of a small gentil mayden.

[And first go into thy privy chamber with our lady Mary
where she awaited the angel message [. . .] Then, sister,
wonder greatly in thine heart how that very lord [. . .] was
enclosed within the bowels of a gentle maiden.]¹³

Two things are especially striking. First, the anchoress is bid to enter into her privy chamber with Mary, wherein the "angel message" (Annunciation), took place. Second, Aelred included this scene under a section on meditation and practice (meditatione); the enclosure of Christ within his mother's womb suggests a practical image, signifying a parallel between the anchorhold, the enclosed site of the Annunciation and the sealed womb of Mary. Presumably, the bedchamber and the womb represented the anchorhold itself and communicated the redemptive qualities of confined physical space for the anchoress. Furthermore, it emphasized the appropriateness of enclosure and the spiritual, even soteriological effectiveness of a fixed, sealed space such as a womb. It demonstrated the anchoress' vocation to identify with Mary and imitate Christ by becoming enclosed within the walls of real and metaphorical chastity, purity and virginity. Later, Aelred wrote as though his sister literally accompanied Mary to the site of the Visitation, located on a hill: "Now after þis stee vp wit þy lady to þe hul where þat EliẒabeth and blessedde Marye wit kleppyingge and kissyngge mette togydere." [Now after this stay up with thy lady to the hill where that Elizabeth and blessed Mary embracing and kissing met together.]¹⁴ The site of the anchorhold, envisaged first as the sealed womb of the Virgin, became the entry point into the expanded literary space of the Gospel, where the anchoress not only left the anchorhold to visit imagined landscapes but also accompanied Mary to the house of her cousin, Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. In fact, *A Revelation of Love*

draws upon similar womb imagery to define and express sacred and sealed containment, which Julian would later represent through the interconnected allegories of the hazelnut and of the city of the soul: "For this was her [Mary's] marvayling: that he that was her maker would be borne of her that was made."¹⁵ The imagery is precise: the created encloses and nurtures the uncreated; the infinite is embodied and enclosed in the finite. The image of the cell as a sacred womb provided Julian with an antecedent trope of bodily containment and imagined expansion that may have inspired the embodied imagery of infinite becloseness in her treatment of the containment and enclosure of unlimited space.

Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson have suggested that the first and the last books of *Ancrene Wisse* encapsulate, or enclose, the entire composition with a discussion of the "outer rule" considering the exterior life of the anchoress. The six interior books, in turn, discuss the anchoress' interior life. As a result the "outer" books enclose the "inner" books in "a way that parallels the enclosure of the anchoress by the walls of her cell, or her soul by her body."¹⁶ The text, therefore, embodied, or represented, the physical space of the anchorhold. Julian employed a similar structure in *A Revelation of Love*, which is divided into sixteen visions, or shewings, doubling exactly the number of books in the *Ancrene Wisse*. Also, the work begins not with a list of chapters, which was common in Middle English texts, but emphasizes the structure of the revelations, which also define the structure of the book.¹⁷ The first and the last visions enclose the entire text and the remaining fourteen visions. Julian described the first vision as revealing "the incarnation and the oning betweene God and mans soule [. . .] in which all the shewinges that foloweth be groundide and oned."¹⁸ The last vision asserting that the "blisseful trinity our maker, in Christ Jesu our saviour, endlessly wonneth in our soule, worshipfully rewling and yeming [protecting] all thinges," rhetorically seals the rest of the text as "conclusion and confirmation to all fifteen" remaining visions.¹⁹

As indicated above, the first and the last visions in *A Revelation of Love* structurally enclose the balance of the text.

The first vision, which I refer to as the allegory of the hazelnut, describes the enclosing of the human creature within the redemptive Christ figure. The imagery mirrors the spatial reality of the anchorhold, a space in which the creature was enclosed by the sacred. On its own, the hazelnut emphasizes physical becloseness and justifies the tight confines of enclosure according to the physical reality of the anchorhold. The first vision anchors the text just as Julian was anchored to the enclosure. Julian introduced the allegory of the hazelnut with a depiction of Christ as "oure clothing, that for love wrappeth us and windeth us, halseth [embraces] us and all becloseth [encloses] us, hangeth about us for tender love, that he may never leeve us."²⁰ With this image in mind she directed the narrative toward the vision in which Christ

shewed a little thing the quantity of an haselnot, lying in the palme of my hand as me semide, and it was rounde as any balle. I looked theran with the eye of my understanding, and thought: "What may this be?" And it was answered generally thus: "It is all that is made." I marvayled how it might laste, for methought it might sodenly have fallen to nought for littleness.²¹

She proceeded to indicate that within the tiny hazelnut she perceived three properties. The first "is that God made it," the second property "is that God loveth it," and finally the third property is "that God kepeth it."²² The hazelnut, then, represents all created life. It is tiny and insignificant, yet it represents the whole of creation, which is itself "naughted," or nothing in comparison to the love and protection of that creation by the uncreated. The wholeness of creation therefore pales in comparison to the limitlessness of the uncreated. Furthermore, creation is itself wrapped: the meat of the hazelnut, its essence, is wrapped by its outer shell, which protects it, just as God "kepeth" all his creation. The physical space of the enclosure sealed Julian within the sacred, just as the hazelnut is sealed and enclosed within its shell. Moreover, all of creation is sealed within the shell of the hazelnut, suggesting that the anchorhold played a teleological role in the relationship of creation to the divine. In the thirteenth vision, for example, Christ reveals that at the end

of history, "God will be enclosed in rest and pees" when Christ's "thurst [. . .] to have us all togeder, hole in him to his endless bliss" is finally quenched.²³

While the first vision describes creation's becloseness in Christ; the sixteenth and last vision describes Christ's becloseness within the human soul. With the sixteenth showing, the teleological role of the anchorhold is realized, as the human soul is "oned" to Christ in the absolute expansion of space within the sealed place of absolute enclosure. In turn, the sixteenth vision combined with the first, seals the narrative like two halves of a nutshell:

And then oure good lorde opened my gostely eye and
shewde me my soule in the middes of my harte. I saw the
soule so large as it were an endless warde, and also as it
were a blisseful kingdom, and by the conditions that I saw
therin I understode that it is a worshipfulle citte. In the
middes of that citte sits our lorde Jhesu, very God and
very man [. . .] I saw him clothed solemnly in worshippes.
He sitteth in the soule even righte in peas and rest, and
he ruleth and yemeth heven and erth and all that is. The
manhode with the godhead sitteth in rest; the godhead
ruleth and yemeth withouten ony instrument or besiness;
and the soule is alle occupied with the blessed godhead.²⁴

In examining this excerpt, one should note immediately the reversed enclosure of Christ "clothed solemnly" with worshippers inside the city of the soul that mirrors the image of Christ's enclosure of the soul described in the first revelation. The real and imaginative space that sealed and enclosed Julian has been inverted to seal and enclose Christ in the expansive space of a vast city that she located in the middle of her heart. Moreover, Christ was enclosed three times: first within her heart or soul; next, her soul was sealed in her body; finally, both were sealed within the anchorage. Liz Herbert McAvoy notes the prevalence of the theme of the sealing of the soul within the body that appears in many examples of anchoritic literature.²⁵ Moreover, the triple concealment of Christ mirrors the trinitarian theology that Julian also expressed in the first vision in which each person of the trinity was imagined to enclose the soul. The space of the anchorage helped to express limitless space. While Christ is

“clothed solemnly in worshippes” he sits within the soul in “peas and rest,” indicating a teleological resolution to God’s desire in the thirteenth revelation to “be enclosed in rest and pees.”²⁶ Julian was careful to describe the soul as residing within the body, so it is *her* body now wrapping; it is *her* body that now acts as the shell of the hazelnut enclosing itself around the meat of the nut. The vastness of the uncreated surpasses the limits of its containment. While the tiny hazelnut wrapped and contained the vastness of all of God’s creation, the soul, which fits into the middle of Julian’s heart, contained the vastness of Christ’s kingdom. The tight confines of the container that enclosed seemingly limitless vastness also echo the physical confines of the anchorhold. To borrow from Julian’s metaphorical language, God now resides within the hazelnut and the confined space of the created encloses the infinite vastness of the uncreated; the human body, bound by corporeality, encloses the immense space of the human soul—and the enclosed space of the anchorhold contains the limitlessness of the sacred. The vast field of imaginative space rendered sacred space limitless. Julian completed the metaphor, explaining that:

in him we are beclosed and he in us. We are beclosed in the fader, and we are beclosed in the son, and we are beclosed in the holy gost. And the fader is beclosed in us, the son is beclosed in us, and the holy gost is beclosed in us.²⁷

Maud McInerney suggests that the intended rhetorical impact of the verb *beclosen*, which can indicate a desire to “close [. . .] shut in [. . .] to fortify” or to “entomb or bury,” throughout this passage was meant to echo the language of enclosure.²⁸ It is this textual exposition of the cyclic enclosure of God into the *corpus hominis* and the *corpus hominis* into the Godhead that Julian transmogrified into the physical space of the anchorhold.²⁹ In so doing, she closed the circle of infinite becloseness, wherein the created was enclosed by the uncreated and the uncreated by the created; and where the anchorage enclosed confined space, and the confined enclosed limitlessness.

To conclude, in *A Revelation of Love*, the distinctive parallel between the enclosure of the text and the enclosure of the body within the anchoritic cell, suggests that Julian’s appropriation of physical space was brought to bear in the rhetorical power

of textual space. Such a rhetorical power is evinced in the text's structure and the parabalization of infinite becloseness implicated by the allegories of the hazelnut and the city of the soul, both of which serve to enclose the entire text. The allegory of the hazelnut affirmed the rhetoric of enclosure and maintained the validity of enclosed space as an appropriate avenue of feminine religious vocation. In examining this allegory, we see that Julian responded to prevailing discourses on femininity and feminine religious expression that polarized women's characters as either virginal like Mary or sinful like Eve. At the same time however, the allegory of the city of the soul, which operates in tandem with the allegory of the hazelnut to enclose text, vision, and imaginative landscape, exceeds the limits of confined physical space within the boundaries of narrative place. As such, the allegory of the city of the soul serves a dual function of both effacing discursive boundaries of space by offering limitless expansion, while also intensifying these boundaries by imagining this effacement exclusively within the place of textual space.

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END NOTES

1. Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 151.
2. Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*, p. 168. In a similar vein, see Barbara A. Hanawalt, "At the Margin of Women's Space in Medieval Europe," in *Matrons and Marginal Women in Medieval Society*, ed. Robert Edwards and Vickie L. Ziegler (Woodbridge and Rochester: Boydell, 1995), pp. 1-18; Liz Herbert McAvoy, "'Ant nes he him soelf reclus i Maries wombe?' Julian of Norwich, The Anchorhold, and the Redemption of the Monstrous Female Body," in *Consuming Narratives: Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Tessa Walters (Cardiff: U Wales P, 2002), pp. 128-144; Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards "Introduction: Intersections of Time and Space in Gender and Enclosure," in *Anchorites, Wombs, and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards (Cardiff: U Wales P, 2005), pp. 6-26; esp. pp. 7-12; Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 1-27, and pp. 64-72; Ann

- Candlin "Reflections on Elaine Graham's Model of Space," *Feminist Theology* 9.3 (1992): 82-95; Janel M. Mueller, "Autobiography of a New 'Creature': Female Spirituality, Selfhood, and Authorship in the *Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Literacy and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1986), pp. 155-172.
3. Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, "Gender, Celibacy, and Proscriptions of Sacred Space: Symbol and Practice," in *Women's Space: Patronage, Place and Gender in the Medieval Church*, ed. Virginia Chieffo Raguin and Sarah Stanburg (Albany: SUNY P, 2005), pp. 185-206; p. 185.
4. The use of the singular *A Revelation of Love* as the title for the Long Text, while not universally adopted in academic parlance, is more consistent with the nomenclature that Julian herself assigned to both her visionary experience and the Long Text, which is introduced in each extant manuscript as "a revelation of love that Jhesu Christ, our endles blisse, made in sixteen shewinges" (p. 123). This particular convention is maintained in the edition of *A Revelation* used in the present essay. Marion Glasscoe, Nicholas Watson, and Liz Herbert McAvoy, among others, have adopted a similar convention in the belief that, as Watson has suggested, Julian perceived her visions "as a single and theologically integrated revelation sent by God." Nicholas Watson, "The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*," *Speculum* 68.3 (1993): 637-683; pp. 637-8. See also *A Revelation of Love*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Exeter: U Exeter P, 1976); McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, p. 2. For a discussion of textual tension as an entry point into text, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, London, and Los Angeles: U California P, 1982), pp. 1-9.
5. *Beclosen* is a Middle English verb meaning "to enclose" or "embrace." E.g., see Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love in The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2006), p. 139.
6. Elizabeth M. Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women: Periculoso and Its Commentators, 1298-1545* (Washington, DC: Catholic UP, 1997), pp. 9-21.
7. Goscelin of Canterbury, *Life of Saint Augustine* quoted from Schulenburg, "Gender, Celibacy, and Proscriptions of Sacred Space," p. 192; see also David Townsend, "Omissions, Emissions, Missionaries, and Master Signifiers in Norman Canterbury," *Exemplaria* 7.2 (1995): 291-315.
8. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Brown Meech, 2nd ed. (London, New York, and Toronto: Oxford UP, 1961), p. 27.
9. *Old and Middle English c 890-1400: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Treharne. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. xv.
10. *Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Bella Millet (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), pp. 142-143.
11. Denis Renevey, "Middle English Writings for Women: *Ancrene Wisse*," in *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. David F. Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), pp. 198-212; p. 199.

12. McAvoy, "Ant nes he him soelf reclus i Maries wombe?" p. 131.
13. Aelred of Rievaulx, *De Institutione Inclusarum* (*MS Verona*), ed. John Ayto and Alexandra Barratt (London, New York, and Toronto: Oxford UP, 1984), p. 39.
14. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Institutione Inclusarum*, p. 40.
15. Julian of Norwich, *Revelation*, p. 133.
16. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, ed., *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrone Wisse and Associated Works* (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1991), p. 43; see also Renevey, "Middle English Writings for Women," pp. 200-203.
17. Watson, "The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*," pp. 637-8.
18. Julian of Norwich, *Revelation*, p. 123.
19. Julian of Norwich, *Revelation*, p. 125 and p. 331.
20. Julian of Norwich, *Revelation*, p. 139.
21. Julian of Norwich, *Revelation*, p. 139.
22. Julian of Norwich, *Revelation*, p. 139.
23. Julian of Norwich, *Revelation*, p. 219.
24. Julian of Norwich, *Revelation*, p. 335 and p. 337.
25. McAvoy, "Ant nes he him soelf reclus i Maries wombe?" pp. 136-9.
26. Julian of Norwich, *Revelation*, p. 337 and p. 219.
27. Julian of Norwich, *Revelation*, p. 299.
28. Maud Brunett McInerney, "In the Meyden's Womb: Julian of Norwich and the Poetics of Enclosure," in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York and London: Garland, 1996), pp. 157-199; p. 157.
29. Andrew Sprung, "'We nevyr shall come out of hym': Enclosure and Immanence in Julian of Norwich's *Book of Showings*," *Mystics Quarterly* 19.2 (1993): 47-62; p. 53.